

Transformative Learning Theory

General

Transformative learning theory is a [humanist learning theory](#) introduced by [Jack Mezirow](#) in 1981¹⁾. This theory does not address general aspects of learning, but rather **transformative learning** in adults: the learning that **strongly influences learner**, his **beliefs** and **values**. In this theory,

- “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action.”²⁾

What is transformative learning theory?

Since it is based on the importance of experience and its understanding, Mezirow's theory applies to adult learning. Adults accumulate during their lives plenty of experience in terms of associations, concepts, values, feelings, and beliefs. These elements of the experience form a number of various **meaning schemata**, each of which contains only specific knowledge and values. As defined by Mezirow, a meaning schema is

- “the constellation of concept, belief, judgment, and feelings which shapes a particular interpretation.”³⁾

An example of a meaning schema is how we act around a homeless person.⁴⁾ All the meaning schemata together form the **meaning perspective**, as Mezirow describes one's complete perspective on the world or a *general frame of reference*. Meaning perspectives are acquired passively until early adulthood, often through significant experiences with teachers, or parents, and are later modified through transformative learning.

What characterizes transformative learning is the initial inability to fit the new material into the existing frames of schemata, what results in a need to change them. For example, a change of attitude to homeless people after realizing how hard their life is. These-like experiences are also called *perspective transformations*. They often come due to life experiences, often related to strong emotional responses. These may be personal crises like divorce, death of a friend or a family member, wars, natural or man-caused disasters, health crises, etc, but do not have to be so radical.⁵⁾

In the classroom, commonly three types of experience can result in transformative learning⁶⁾:

- **experience**,
- **critical reflection**, and
- **rational discourse**.

Usually these follow one after another: a strong emotional experience fosters critical reflection and analysis of similar past experiences, which will, when discussed with others with different or similar points of view, result in new conclusions and a perspective transformation.

What is the practical meaning of transformative learning theory?

Different authors suggested different roles of students and teachers during the transformative learning. The role of the students is mostly to take responsibility for their learning and creating a pleasant environment, and suggestions to the teachers generally refer to ⁷⁾:

- creating a **safe environment** facilitating relationships characterized by **trust** and **care**,
- **understanding why** they want to encourage a change in students and not only how and which change,
- assisting in the development of the **critical reflection** in students,
- taking into consideration and talking about students' feelings,
- enabling their students to apply the new insights outside the classroom,
- helping others by sharing his experiences, and
- being a **role-model** displaying his own willingness to change and learn.

Keywords and most important names

- **transformative learning theory, adult learning, meaning perspectives, meaning schemata, perspective transformations, experience, critical reflection, rational discourse**
- [Jack Mezirow](#)

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Read more

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